

Interchanging with the SP

An exercise in selective compression/**Jack Burgess**

The Yosemite Valley Railroad interchanged with two common carriers in Merced, California, the Santa Fe and the Southern Pacific.

Although the YV originally interchanged Pullmans with both railroads, Pullman traffic with the AT&SF had been discontinued by 1930. The SP interchange

was therefore the more important of the two to incorporate into my layout, both operationally and as a means to explain how the YV handled Pullmans



AL ROSE PHOTO; EARLY 1940'S

Merced looked placid in this Al Rose photo from the 1940's. It was shot from the top of the Golden State Creamery looking south. The Yosemite Valley (out of view) is off to the left and the YV tracks from the station bisect the vacant field next to the house on the left side of the photo. The tracks continue across the highway near the Pine Cone Cafe billboard between the pavement stop bars and then turn to follow the curb line toward the

south before swinging to the right to reach the Southern Pacific depot. The Park View Auto Camp is behind the gas station on the near side of the first intersecting street, while the Magnus Root Beer stand is next to the single palm tree a block further south. The SP mainline is on the extreme right of the photo next to the line of tank cars while the Roadmaster's house is beyond the pair of billboards and the water tank can be seen sticking out of trees.

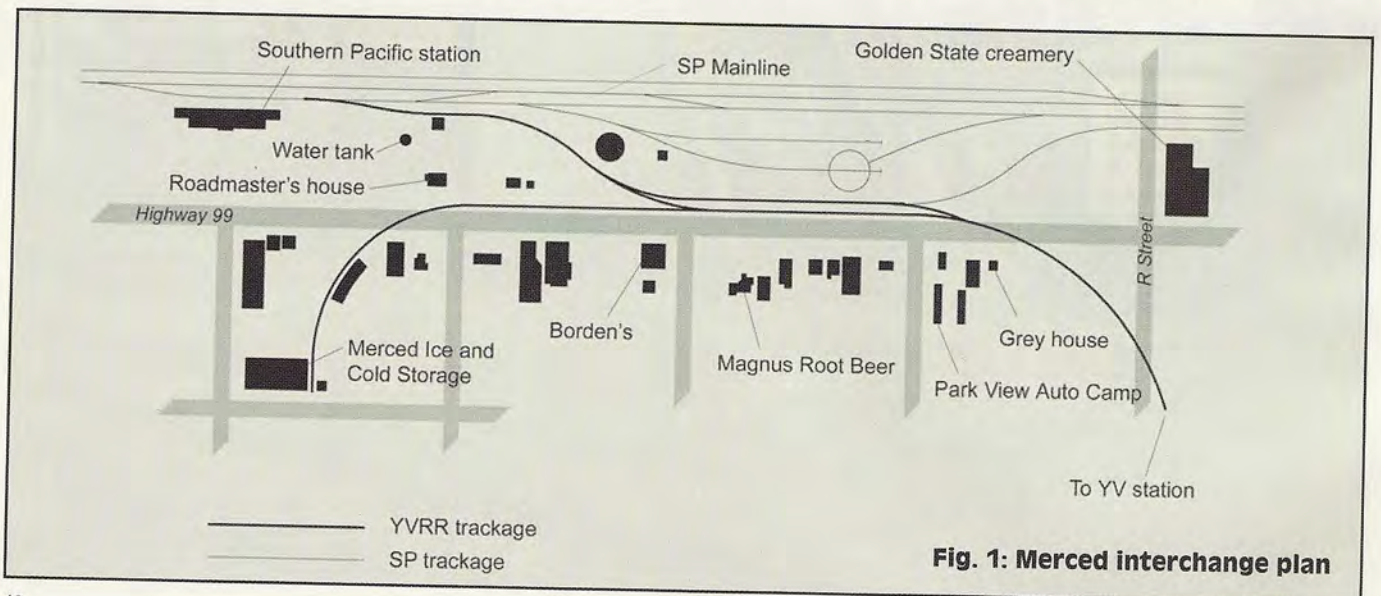


Fig. 1: Merced interchange plan

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destined for Yosemite National Park.

The interchange between the SP and YV was fairly simple and is shown in Figure 1. It was used for both picking up SP Pullmans in front of the SP station and exchanging incoming and outgoing freight cars. The SP stationed a switcher in Merced and it worked the YV siding along 16th Street (Highway 99), picking up and setting out cars to be interchanged with the YV. This passing track could be accessed from either direction, simplifying work for the SP crews.

Trackage in the SP interchange area on my layout was laid shortly after starting construction and basic scenery was soon in place. The major scenery element was a portion of Highway 99, the main north/south highway arterial

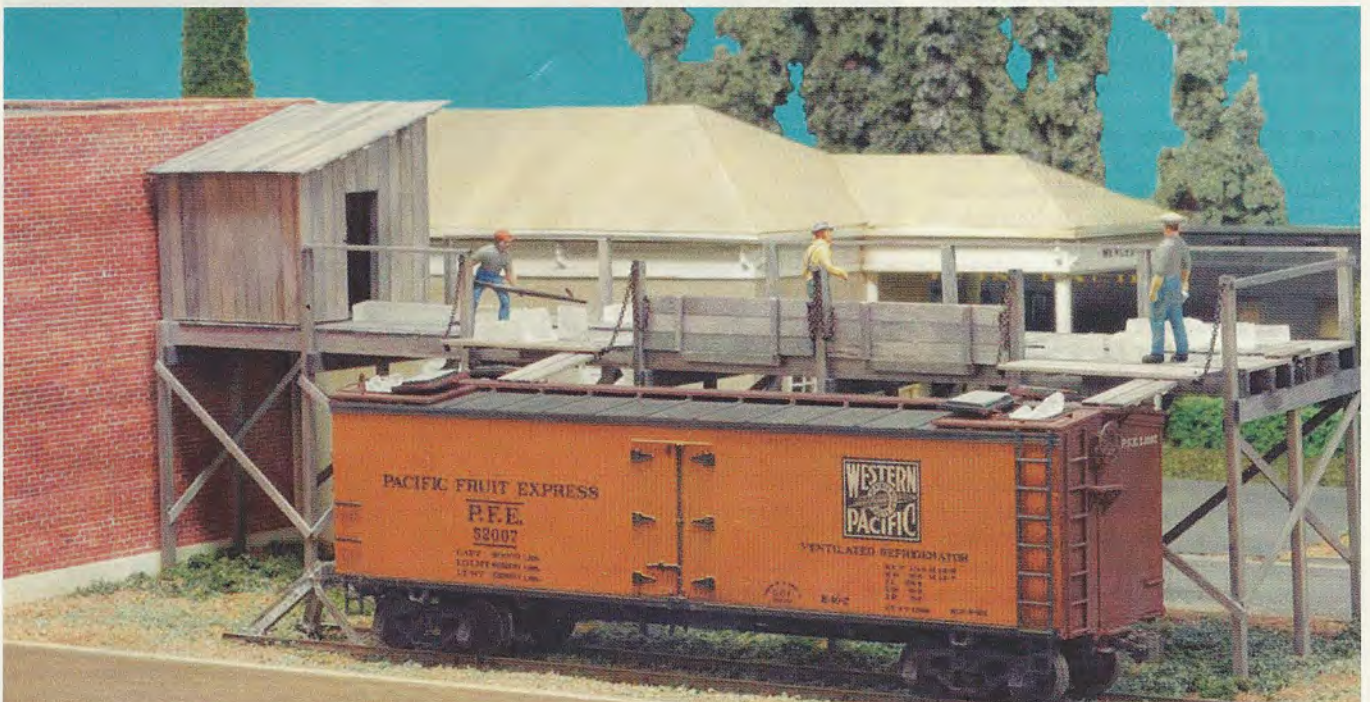


DEMORO ARCHIVES: KEN MEEKER COLLECTION; SEPTEMBER, 1944

YV observation car 330 (*above*) rests after a fan trip; it is near the north end of the SP station platform. The SP water tank can be seen in the background. The modeled interchange (*below*) is only seven feet long and shows the ice platform on the left and the SP station and water tank in the left corner. Borden's and Magnus Root Beer are in the middle of the scene and the Golden State creamery is on the right. A PFE refrigerator car is iced (*bottom*) at the Merced Ice and Cold Storage plant. The Sanborn maps show a platform next to the plant. The model is based on standard PFE ice platforms of the time.

through California from the Mexican border to Oregon and beyond. A few years later, I discovered that a Chinese restaurant in business along this sec-

tion of Highway 99 had been a root beer restaurant in 1939 (the year that I am modeling). I described building a model of that structure (Magnus Root Beer) in



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The late rail photographer, Will Whittaker, took hundreds of photos of freight cars (*above*) but never learned to drive. To get to sites on the line, his friend Bill Pennington drove him to the Yosemite Valley. As a tribute, Will is seen photographing the refrigerator car while Bill stands near the car. The SP water tank (*right*) and roadmaster's house are across the highway from the two railfans. The prototype colors of these two structures help reinforce their SP ownership. The SP 4-8-2 on the head end of the train and has the correct lettering for 1939.

the June, 1988, issue of RMC. More research uncovered three more still-standing buildings that had been there in 1939, and they were photographed for future reference.

However, with a couple of exceptions, more work on completing the interchange area languished for years with little additional progress. Over time, I uncovered more information about the area through Sanborn maps, research for my book on the Yosemite Valley Railroad, and field trips. Even though I eventually had the information needed to finish this area, I finally realized that the stumbling block was my dissatisfaction with the compromises inherent in my original plan. Basically, I just didn't like how the area looked. It was too barren, lacked any attractive features, and, most important, didn't look like the prototype.

When I originally designed my SP in-



terchange area nearly 30 years ago, I had very little information available on the size or types of buildings around the SP station in 1939, although I did have a YV 1912 drawing of the trackage in this area. Not having room on my layout for the prototype passing track/set-out track, I added a pair of non-prototype spurs into my plan near the SP station. My logic was that they would offer additional switching oppor-

tunities by providing a place to store foreign freight cars waiting to be picked up by the Southern Pacific.

Looking over the layout one day, I realized that the pair of non-prototype spurs were not only a mental distraction, they were preventing me from incorporating some of the features of that area which defined the interchange and Highway 99 along these few blocks. While the original concept of trying to in-



A sailor on leave (*above*) stands next to the Magnus Root Beer parking lot and watches Yosemite Valley 4-4-0 No. 22 switch a PFE reefer across Highway 99 on the ice platform spur. The Park View Auto Camp (*below*) reveals how the layout's front fascia extends up to blend into the building and hide the truncated portion of the structure.



crease operating opportunities with these spurs had been worth considering, in practice they were never used except to store a couple of bad-order freight cars.

After I recognized this, it was easy to visualize how the area should look. I pulled out a series of prototype photos of the interchange area and made a short list of buildings and details to incorporate into the scene. An hour later the spurs were gone, and three weeks later six new buildings (or portions of buildings) were in place, the scenery patched and revived, and prototype details incorporated into the scene. The result was a 1939 scene which more accurately replicated the prototype of that time and helped compliment the rest of the layout.

The prototype

The YV station was on R Street a RAILROAD MODEL CRAFTSMAN

couple of blocks to the east (per YV timetable directions) of the SP mainline. Tracks ran west from the YV station and crossed R Street and a vacant lot at the corner of R Street and Highway 99 before crossing Highway 99 itself. The tracks then continued south for another block before swinging over to the SP mainline near the SP station. A long spur continued south along Highway 99 before crossing the street to serve Merced Ice and Cold Storage. While the spur on the prototype turned 90 degrees to reach the ice house, my spur curved to run parallel to the highway after crossing it.

Selective compression

I have been able to avoid severe selective compression on most areas of my layout with the obvious exception of

sidings, spur lengths, and the distance between towns. For example, all of the buildings in the Merced yards are represented (or will be) and are modeled full-size without the need for selective compression. Likewise, while the El Portal yard is about 70 percent of the length of the prototype, all of the buildings are full size.

However, it was over 2,400 feet between the SP station and Golden State creamery on the north on the prototype. To model that area in its entirety in HO scale would require 27 feet. I only had seven feet of layout space. Obviously, a great deal of selective compression was needed.

Selective compression can involve two aspects: selecting only a small percentage of the buildings on the prototype to model, and/or reducing the size of those buildings if required. Although not really compression, "cutting" buildings at the edge of the layout or back-drop is another option.

Selecting which prototype buildings to model is generally not difficult. The normal approach is to include those signature structures that help a visitor understand both the railroad and the area being modeled. For my interchange area, these included the SP station, one or more SP support buildings (to help reinforce that fact that this was SP property), something to justify the spur into the ice plant, and some of the buildings along Highway 99.

In 1939, there were a number of gas stations and auto camps, predecessors of today's motels, along Highway 99 in Merced to serve the growing legions of tourists headed to Yosemite by automobile. The fact that more and more people were traveling with their own car cut deeply into the YV's passenger car revenue beginning in the mid-1920's, so modeling either one of the many gas stations or auto camps along Highway 99 could help interpret this impact on the YV's passenger business.

After selecting the prototype buildings to model, the challenge was to fit them into the space available. For large buildings, the usual approach is to remove "duplicate" features, such as some of the windows, to reduce a wide building into something that fits the space available while not sacrificing the overall design of the building.

But, this approach doesn't always work. The SP station next to the interchange was over 220 feet long, equivalent to 2½ feet long in HO scale, 35 percent of the total layout length I had available. There was no way to fit a compressed yet creditable model of this building in the space available. I therefore had no option but to build a very short section of the prototype building

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This view looks down the interchange track toward the SP mainline. Yosemite Valley engines were allowed beyond the stop sign

next to the engine although they had to stop before proceeding. The stop sign detail was copied from prototype photographs.

(slightly less than 30 percent of the length), then butt it into the backdrop on the left side of the scene.

One of the other problems I faced was that the space between my rendition of Highway 99 and the front fascia is much too short to allow many of the buildings on the south side of the highway to be modeled without severe "chopping." I recognized this problem back in 1980 when I designed the layout but had not yet implemented it.

Years ago, I thought about adding flat black "backs" to those buildings which "extended" beyond the layout. This approach is similar to the idea of using flat black ceilings and valances since they tend to disappear or be ignored. Before trying the idea, I happened to exchange some e-mails with Bill Schneider, who is modeling the New York, Ontario & Western and who had already addressed this issue. Bill painted the fascia side of the "chopped-off" buildings on his layout the same color as the fascia itself. After testing my flat black approach with construction paper, I printed up some "fascia colored" paper from my computer, and

that confirmed that his idea was a better solution. Since my fascia is constructed of $\frac{1}{8}$ "-thick hardboard, I cut pieces of the same material the size of each chopped building, painted them to match the fascia and glued them to the backs of the buildings. As hoped, these buildings seem to blend into the fascia.

The modeled buildings

Eliminating all but one of the residential buildings along this length of Highway 99 was an easy decision since they are long gone, and I didn't have any photos of them. Across the street, there were a number of structures on the SP property but some, such as the 60-foot diameter oil tank, could not be modeled because of the lack of room. I was able to fit the SP water tank into the grove of trees north of the station, but I still needed to slightly reduce the diameter of the tank from the prototype size to fit the space available. The SP roadmaster had a railroad-provided house along the highway here, but I didn't have any photos available except one from 1908 that showed it in the background surrounded by a white rail fence. While I had to com-

promise on the design and size of the house, painting it in standard SP colors ensures that the viewer at least knows that it is an SP building.

With one exception, all of the buildings in this section of my layout were scratchbuilt from Evergreen styrene, my favorite building material. The exception was the small section of the Merced Ice and Cold Storage building. I wanted to use Paper Creek brick paper for this building, so it made more sense to construct it from wood since I could then use white glue to bond the brick paper to the wood shell. I cut the walls and roof from $\frac{1}{32}$ "-thick plywood on a small table saw, reinforced the sides with large pieces of basswood, and added the brick paper after the shell was done. The concrete stem wall at the base of the building was replicated with pre-painted styrene applied over the brick paper with industrial-grade double-sided tape. (I used the same tape with corrugated foil for the building described in my article in the November, 2007, issue of RMC.)

Years ago, I had been able to photograph one of the old auto camps along

this section of Highway 99 before it was demolished. According to Sanborn maps, the accommodations at this auto camp were quite limited, having 10' x 15' carports and 15' x 15' cottages. In order to fit this structure into the available space, I eliminated the entire set of buildings on one side of the complex and also butted the building up to the extended fascia.

Determining the name of this auto camp circa 1939 was more difficult than fitting it into the space. I was told many years ago that it was called "Yosemite Camp Tourist Cabins." However, years of research never revealed any auto camp along Highway 99 with this name. About the time I began reworking this area, a YV modeler and friend in Holland found a photo of this establishment on eBay which proved that it had been named "Park View Auto Camp." Adding a duplicate of the rooftop sign from this photo completed my model of the tourist cabins.

Details

Another signature element from this scene that begged to be modeled is the Pine Cone Cafe billboard facing southbound traffic on Highway 99 next to the YV highway crossing. The Pine Cone Cafe was a longtime tradition in Merced, the place to be "seen." After estimating the dimensions of the billboard, I drew it using a CAD program, then used that plan to fabricate it from .020" styrene. The lettering was laid out in Photoshop® by starting with an approximate font. Each line of text was

then rasterized so that it could be stretched and/or compressed as needed to more closely replicate the prototype lettering and also fit the billboard. The lettering was printed on clear inkjet decal paper (available from Micro-Mark) and applied to the painted billboard after it had been given a gloss coat of Future® wax. An overspray of Testors Dullcote® and some weathering completed the billboard.


There are a number of traffic signs along this short section of California Highway 99, including advance railroad grade crossing signs for the two grade crossings (white with black lettering, not the current yellow with black lettering), a speed limit sign, highway identification signs, and stop signs for the side streets. I modeled some of these signs 30 years ago using paper copies from a highway manual. However, I didn't realize until a few years ago that my railroad grade crossing signs were too modern since I had used the then-correct yellow and black signs. I also wasn't happy with the paper copies. While they were the correct size and color, their paper ancestry was too obvious.

Fortunately, I found a website (www.caltrafficsigns.com) whose owner collects historic traffic signs and has posted photos of his sign collection on his website. With his permission, I saved photos from his website for the signs I needed, reduced their size to HO scale (many traffic signs are 24" wide, especially for 25-35 m.p.h. applications), and printed them on photographic paper

which nicely simulates the porcelain enamel used on these old signs. The resolution of the website images is high enough that if you increase the resolution when you reduce the image size (select "Resample" in Photoshop Elements® under Image/Resize/Image Size), you'll see the reflective buttons, rust stains, and even the CSAA logo at the bottom of some of the scaled signs. (As related in the history section of this website, the California State Automobile Association installed such traffic signs in central and northern California from 1914 through 1969.)

The automobiles in this section of my layout were modeled primarily with resin kits from Sylvan Models, plus a couple of Athearn plastic vehicles. These vehicles were fitted with the unique prototype California license plates issued in 1939 advertising the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island. I printed scaled copies of photos of these license plates found on the internet.

Success

Every now and then, lack of progress in a certain area of a layout might actually be stagnation due to dissatisfaction because of prototype compromises or past "less-than-acceptable" modeling standards, rather than "lack of time" or other priorities. It can sometimes be difficult to recognize that something you built years ago doesn't meet your current standards, but once you acknowledge that shortcoming, it can be both fun and rewarding to bring it up to your current expectations. 



YV No. 22 pushes a UTLX tank car across Highway 99 toward the interchange. Note the Highway 99 sign on the street light pole. The

street light is a Woodland Scenics cast metal pole from their Street and Traffic Light set with the cast light replaced with a pearl.